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Problem-based learning and the relevance of teaching and learning European Studies in times of crises

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Abstract

The succession of economic and financial crises, the migration crisis, and, of course, Brexit have raised many questions about the future of the European Union. Such crises present challenges for teaching and learning European Studies. This article discusses the question how to maintain a relevant study programme while taking into account ever-changing societal developments. Based on a survey conducted among students of a Bachelor in European Studies, and a subsequent focus group discussion, we look at programme relevance and programme capacity to deal with societal change in the context of a problem-based learning environment. Our study reveals that problem-based learning, when applied consistently and correctly, is a good educational approach to ensure that a study programme is relevant and capable of capturing societal change. At the same time, students seem to prefer a more guided version of problem-based learning, which presents challenges concerning its possible contribution to teaching and learning in times of crises. While we discuss the situation in one specific BA programme, we will do so in light of general challenges in the fields of European Studies, International Relations, and Politics.

Keywords European Studies · Problem-based learning · Relevance · Societal change · Teaching and learning

Introduction

Our ever-changing society presents challenges for programmes in European Studies, International Relations and Politics. For instance, at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the University Association for Contemporary European Studies

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(UACES), David et al. (2017) write that European Studies is characterised by, among other things, its close ties with one of its main objects of study, the European Union (EU), and, related to the latter, its events-driven scholarship. Accordingly, the recent economic and financial crises, the migration crisis, and Brexit have raised questions about the EU's future that are echoed in our teaching, in our students' interests, and in the professional world that our graduates will join after graduation (Hodson and Puetter 2018; Parker 2016).

Indeed, a recent debate section in the *Journal of European Public Policy* asks whether we need to rethink teaching and learning in European Studies as the EU 'stumbles from crisis to crisis' (Rittberger and Blauberger 2018: 436). While the different contributions do not provide an answer to this question—they discuss research implications of the crises—they do provide a first clue as to how European Studies programmes should respond to these crises. We need to pay more attention to 'critical and reflexive perspectives, rather than treating the EU as a 'neutral' object of study' (Rittberger and Blauberger 2018: 437), as well as 'better come to grips with the disintegrative dynamics' (438; see also Hodson and Puetter 2018). Similarly, Manners and Rosamond (2018) and Parker (2016) also argue that a thorough comprehension of European developments requires a more critical and diversified approach.

We aim to provide a better understanding as to how European Studies, International Relations and Politics programmes can adequately react to the challenges presented by our ever-changing society. In doing so we focus on student perceptions. One of the key reasons why students choose a programme in Higher Education (HE), and an important factor in their motivation for studying, is relevance (Kember et al. 2008; Tinto 2017). As relevance of study programmes is linked to personal experiences, it is crucial to take students' perceptions of relevance into account (Alexander 2018). Moreover, engaging them in thinking about curricula leads to new insights (Brooman et al. 2015). These observations result in the following research question: When do students consider a study programme to be relevant and what programme characteristics are necessary to deal with societal change? We particularly examine the expectation that active, student-centred learning environments might be best capable of dealing with this challenge (Bovill et al. 2011). One form of active learning is problem-based learning (PBL). As PBL allows for flexibility as to what topics are being discussed and what literature is being read, we expect it to be an ideal environment to engage with our ever-changing environment.

We use the case of Maastricht University's Bachelor in European Studies (BA ES). Prospective students and their parents, as well as current students, have raised questions about the viability and relevance of European Studies in times of crises. Based on a survey ($N = 134$) conducted among BA ES students and a subsequent focus group discussion, we look at relevance and curriculum design in the context of a PBL environment. From this we learn that relevance is an important, yet difficult to define concept. In addition, students seem to prefer a more guided version of PBL, which presents a challenge with regard to PBL's possible contribution to teaching and learning in times of crises.



The challenge of being (and staying) relevant

HE programmes are increasingly confronted with a host of challenges. This includes requirements related to student numbers and retention and completion rates, an increase in anxiety and stress among students, and growing attention to employability (Coertjens et al. 2017; Szekeres 2010). When discussing how to deal with such challenges and demands in an ever-changing society, we touch upon the central question whether HE's purpose is to enhance knowing, doing or being (Shay 2016). Gijselaers et al. (2014: 21) are very explicit in their answer to this question: 'content can't be king', because an ever-changing society needs graduates who have the skills to deal with this complexity, rather than graduates who have detailed knowledge about a subject. Yet, students often choose to study HE programmes because of their perceived relevance in light of contemporary developments (Szekeres 2010).

Relevance is often conceptualised differently. For Bainbridge Frymier and Shulman (1995: 41), relevance is a link between content and students' interests and (career) goals. Kember et al. (2008: 250) refer to Hodgson, who distinguishes between extrinsic, intrinsic and vicarious experiences of relevance. This categorisation focuses on how students perceive or experience a topic to be relevant. Students can experience a topic to be relevant because they have to learn it (extrinsic experience), because they think about the material to be learned in light of their own experiences or knowledge (intrinsic experience), or because they are inspired by teachers' interest or enthusiasm for a topic (vicarious experience).

These different ways of defining relevance have in common that they stress individual students' personal experience; what is relevant for one student, may not be so for another, and also changes over time due to students' progress throughout their studies. Alexander (2018: 126) characterises relevance as 'person-centred, complex or multifaceted, significant, and modifiable' and concludes that all studies on relevance are fixed on the individual student. Relevance is important, because the more relevant students perceive a programme to be, the more likely they are to be motivated, and, thus, the more likely they are to successfully complete the programme (Tinto 2017).

Active learning approaches are considered to be beneficial for programmes that strive to be societally relevant. Bovill et al. (2011) show that engaged students often perceive a programme as relevant and are more likely to be successful in their studies. This engagement can be perceived through empowerment, ensuring that students own and control their learning process, and making content relevant to students' personal and career goals (Bainbridge Frymier and Shulman 1995). Equally important in enhancing relevance is the extent to which curricula manage to link to everyday applications and topical issues (Kember et al. 2008).

Hence, in order to stay relevant, study programmes dealing with societal change need to consider the following. First, they need to ensure diversity in terms of disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological approaches to be able to critically engage with multifaceted contemporary developments (Manners and Rosamond 2018; Rittberger and Blauberger 2018). Second, since 'content can't



be king’ (Gijsselaers et al. 2014: 21), it is important to ensure the application of theory to realistic cases (Kember et al. 2008) and to link content to students’ personal and career goals (Bainbridge Frymier and Shulman 1995). Third, the aforementioned points are more likely to be achieved in an educational environment that engages and empowers students (Bovill et al. 2011). This leads to the expectation that an active learning environment has the potential of ensuring programme relevance and its capacity to address societal change. In the next section, we discuss teaching and learning in European Studies and explain what PBL might offer in this context.

Why would PBL work to enhance relevance?

European Studies is a broad field of studies that does not have one clear curriculum. Some programmes focus more on the EU, whereas others resemble traditional Area Studies programmes (Calhoun 2003; Rosamond 2007). Maastricht University’s 3-year, interdisciplinary BA ES looks at societal and political challenges from the perspective of broader socio-cultural changes in Europe, which are studied through the lenses of different disciplines. Fully taught in English, each year the programme attracts around 300 new students from all over Europe and even from beyond.

What distinguishes Maastricht’s European Studies programme from others, is its commitment to PBL (Timuş et al. 2016; see also Craig and Hale 2008). PBL rests on four key principles, namely it advances constructive, collaborative, contextualised, and self-directed learning (Moust et al. 2005). It is a student-centred approach to learning, based on active construction of knowledge in the context of specific problems. Learning takes place in groups of 12–15 students, guided by academic staff. Instead of lecturing, staff should support students to find gaps in their knowledge and to tackle these gaps using information they have identified themselves. When new students of Maastricht University are introduced to PBL, they work with the so-called seven steps (Table 1), which essentially mimic the research process: students start with a puzzle, determine what they know and what they do not know about the topic, and develop one or more research questions to guide their learning (see Maurer and Neuhold 2014).

Table 1 Maastricht University’s problem-based learning (PBL) seven steps

1.	Clarification of terms and concepts
2.	Defining the problem statement
3.	Brainstorm using prior knowledge and common sense
4.	Structuring of the brainstorm through constructing a detailed and coherent ‘theory’
5.	Formulation of learning objectives for self-directed learning
6.	Self-study to fill the gaps in knowledge
7.	Post-discussion to integrate acquired knowledge in a suitable explanation

See the video ‘Problem-Based Learning at Maastricht University’ for a more detailed explanation of the process: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMtLXXf9Sko> (last accessed 15 April 2020)



Because of the ever-changing topic of focus of programmes in European Studies, International Relations and Politics, scholars have argued that active, student-centred learning suits these programmes well. In the words of Leston-Bandeira (2012: 55), a student-centred approach to teaching and learning is very suitable to have students ‘engage with ongoing political phenomena and keep abreast of fast changing political developments’. Similarly, Tinto (2017: 263) notes that it is worth exploring the opportunities offered by ‘problem and project-based pedagogies that call for students to apply what they are learning to address meaningful problems’.

Scholars have explored several forms of active learning to foster critical engagement with politics and international relations in Europe and beyond, including the use of drawing (Donnelly and Hogan 2013), threshold concepts (Korosteleva 2010) and simulations (Usherwood 2014). These mostly concern course-level interventions, whereas PBL offers the promise of focussing on the programme level. In its ideal–typical application, PBL advances an inclusive and empowering learning environment (Severiens and Schmidt 2009; Tinto 2017). PBL assumes that students decide on what learning objectives they need to answer and what literature they need to read to tackle the problem at hand. Even when literature is given (which makes sense for students new to PBL), PBL allows for critical discussions that extend beyond that literature. Through its usage of real-world problems and emphasis on self-directed learning, PBL should therefore be able to give students a heightened sense of programme relevance, without students having to know the details of the latest European crisis.

Notwithstanding these potential benefits, PBL also comes with challenges. The role of teaching staff in a PBL environment is to facilitate student-centred learning. The resulting uncertainty and loss of control are often experienced as discomforting, in particular by staff trained in traditional teacher-centred learning environments (Nel et al. 2008; Sproncken-Smith and Harland 2009). When it comes to group learning, both students and teaching staff perceive dealing with inequalities in participation and knowledge as one of the main challenges, with students also mentioning variation between tutors and a degree of uncertainty and frustration about what it is exactly that they are learning (Canavan 2008; Maudsley et al. 2008). Finally, a less obvious challenge concerns curriculum design, given that an interdisciplinary PBL programme requires a coherent, integrated curriculum at the level of content and organisation (Bridges et al. 2016; Sproncken-Smith and Harland 2009). Courses should build upon each other, meaning that content to some extent has to be set in advance. Also, at the level of organisation, there is a need to be clear on what is expected from staff in PBL, and on how they are supported in their professional development as teachers (Erdem 2012).

These challenges can undermine the basic premises on which a properly functioning PBL environment relies (Moust et al. 2005). This includes students no longer thoroughly exploring prior knowledge but rushing through the brainstorm to arrive at less-than-ideal learning objectives for the self-study phase. Another problem concerns the fact that literature is increasingly provided by staff, also in later years, due to which students get to know fewer perspectives on the problem at hand and lose control over an important part of their (self-directed) learning. In the context of our research, we can link this development to a more general trend that European



Studies scholars have become more specialised (David et al. 2017; Manners and Rosamond 2018). As a result, teaching staff feel less comfortable teaching courses outside of their expertise and try to avoid insecurity by prescribing literature that they know well.

Study design

We want to find out whether students share our expectation that PBL is a suitable approach to ensure programme relevance in fields such as European Studies. Hence, we study students’ perceptions of relevance and their thoughts about what programme characteristics are necessary to deal with societal change.

We first designed an anonymous survey that we distributed among all BA ES students ($N=879$) using Qualtrics (survey available upon request). Out of the 879 students invited to do the survey, 211 started the survey, but 73 never completed it. Of the 138 students who completed the survey, 134 consented to us using their answers for this study (15% response rate). Table 2 provides more information about these 134 students. The fact that more third-year students completed the survey might be explained by them feeling more willing and able to look back at 3 years of studying. However, their answers did not substantially differ from

Table 2 Survey respondents ($N=134$)

	Older cohorts	Cohort September 2015	Cohort September 2016	Cohort September 2017	Total
<i>N</i> /cohort	13	50	38	33	134
Gender					
Male	8	19	9	13	49
Female	5	31	29	20	85
Nationality					
German	5	19	16	16	56
Dutch	2	10	4	3	19
Belgian	–	1	6	6	13
Italian	2	1	6	1	10
French	1	5	1	1	8
Bulgaria	1	2	1	1	5
British	1	3	–	–	4
Luxembourgish	–	2	1	–	3
Spanish	–	2	1	–	3
Polish	–		1	1	2
Other	1	5	1	4	11

The distribution of nationalities largely corresponds with the overall distribution of nationalities in the BA ES. All nationalities that only occurred once have been grouped under ‘other’. Yet, gender distribution is normally close to 50/50. The fact that female respondents dominate regularly occurs in teaching and learning research



students in other years. Instead, they reflected personal experiences based on the different groups and tutors that they encountered throughout their studies (Alexander 2018; Maudsley et al. 2008).

The survey contains open and closed questions (the latter using a five-point Likert scale) about personal background, study choice, programme content, and teaching and learning environment. The questions about *study choice* asked respondents why they had originally signed up for the BA ES and whether their expectations have been met. The questions about *programme content* concerned relevance and motivation. Since research shows that students actually perceive relevance in different ways (Alexander 2018), we presented a basic definition ('the programme's contribution to a better understanding of contemporary European developments'), but also asked students to define relevance themselves. The questions about *teaching and learning environment* focussed on students' experience with PBL and its potential contribution to linking course subjects to contemporary developments. We analysed answers to the closed and the open questions of the survey. In the latter case, we grouped responses under general categories, such as 'interdisciplinarity' or 'content', in line with the options we had identified for the closed questions. However, we allowed for new categories to emerge from our analysis.

A final survey question asked whether respondents would be willing to take part in a focus group aimed at discussing these topics in more detail. We planned a focus group of ten students representative of the group of students who completed the questionnaire. Due to reasons beyond our control, three students dropped out at the very last minute, leaving us with the group composition as set out in Table 3. To safeguard students' anonymity, they were given aliases.

The focus group discussion lasted 2 h. Students were provided with an engagement protocol a week before the focus group. On the day itself we introduced them to the three discussion themes that we identified based on the survey: relevance, HE aims and tools, and the role of PBL. The discussion of each theme started with an open question and each came with a short exercise (see below). Audio and video were used to record the discussion.

Table 3 Focus group composition

Name	Gender	Nationality	Year started
Sarah	Female	Belgium	2017
Jan	Male	Germany	2017
Anna	Female	Germany	2017
Franz	Male	Germany	2015
Heinrich	Male	Germany	2015
Tessa	Female	The Netherlands	2016
Willem	Male	The Netherlands	2015



Student perceptions on teaching and learning European Studies in times of crises

Why study European Studies?

In order to better understand relevance of a study programme, it is insightful to look into why students choose a particular programme at all. Students mention many different reasons for opting for the BA ES, but the programme's interdisciplinary approach was clearly most important (mentioned 92 times). As illustrated in the words of one of the students:

The diversity of the study program interested me. I have furthermore always been interested in politics, an *[sic!]* Europe, but political science seemed a bit dry for me. Thus, ES combines different subjects which I enjoy: history, economics, and politics, but also offers several other perspectives.

Other reasons for students to choose this programme are content (wanting to learn more about Europe and the EU was mentioned 29 times), its international classroom (mentioned 22 times), and the programme being offered in English (mentioned 18 times). While PBL may be a defining characteristic of the BA ES, it only came in as the fifth reason for choosing for the BA ES (mentioned 17 times). Students' preference for an interdisciplinary approach ties in with Manners and Rosamond's (2018) observation that interdisciplinary approaches are crucial in order to provide a better understanding of contemporary challenges in European Studies. But does this also make a programme relevant?

What is relevance and when is a study programme relevant?

As Fig. 1 shows, relevance is important according to our respondents and most of them agree that 'the BA ES helps me to better understand contemporary European developments'. But how do students perceive relevance? As explained before, we presented students with a basic definition of relevance and asked them what relevance means to them. The survey results as well as the focus group discussion indicate that there is no simple answer to this question.

Some students provided interesting insights into what relevance means to them:

For me relevance of a study programme means that it is useful, that it has a purpose for the time being or in other words, that you learn things you can apply to your future career and personal life. It is relevant if it prepares you to understand and deal with the current challenges and dynamics of the world and your future job.

Relevance of a study programme would mean to me that the things you learn are still applicable after finishing the study programme.

These examples indicate that many students combine several notions in their definition of relevance. It is crucial for students to have a clear idea about 'what's in it



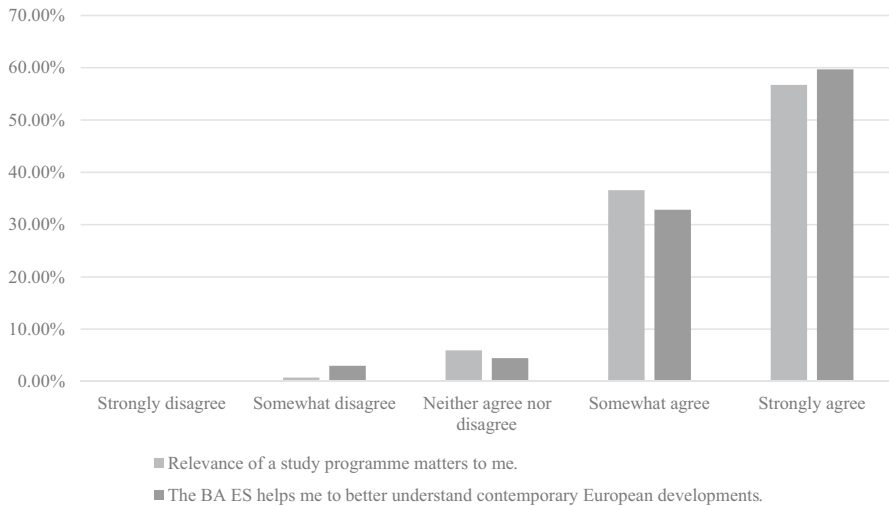


Fig. 1 Relevance and European Studies

for me?’ (Bainbridge Frymier and Shulman 1995: 40). Students need to feel that a programme helps them achieve their own personal and career goals. This is evident in our students’ answers to the survey. Programme relevance in terms of preparation for the job market (linked to achieving career goals) was mentioned frequently (34 times in total). Other linked notions included that a programme is relevant when it provides you with learning skills and when it allows you to directly apply what you have learned (both mentioned 15 times). In addition, some find it important to achieve personal development (mentioned 6 times), described by one student as ‘how a study programme brings out the most of you’.

The notion of relevance mentioned most frequently links to Kember et al.’s (2008) emphasis on ensuring that we make use of realistic cases and do not only concentrate on theory without application. This is reflected in one of the core elements mentioned by our students: a study programme needs to be ‘up-to-date’ and discuss current events. Programme content is very important to them, with 68 out of the 134 responses discussing relevance along these lines. This seems to imply that according to many students content *is* king in ensuring that a study programme is relevant and capable of capturing societal change. However, the survey did not provide sufficient insight into what exactly it is that makes content so relevant. For this the focus group provided clearer insights.

The discussion about relevance in the focus group started with the open question what relevance of a study programme means to the students. The start of the discussion very much resembled answers provided to the open survey question. While Tessa stressed that it is important that a programme teaches the skills needed for a job, Franz highlighted the importance of being up-to-date. The group agreed on the importance of discussing theory, but also wanted the presence of a practice-oriented ‘add-on’ (cf. Kember et al. 2008). The group did not agree on the extent to which



the BA ES currently manages to do this, with some expressing the wish for more practitioner involvement, while others being satisfied with the current approach.

As part of the discussion in the focus group, students were also asked to rank a number of statements derived from the survey according to their importance. They were first asked to do this individually; subsequently, they were asked to rank them as a group. Students were presented with the option to come up with their own additional definition of relevance, which they did not make use of. The group discussion led to the following ranking:

1. 'Relevance of a study programme entails how applicable or useful your knowledge and skills are in the real world.'
2. 'A relevant study programme is one that allows reflection on current societal issues.'
3. 'The relevance of a study programme comes from its ability to prepare for a future workplace.'
4. 'Relevance of a study programme means that the knowledge obtained will be helpful and insightful for one's own personal development.'
5. 'A relevant study programme is one that is in direct connection to the present.'

Students' main motivation for this ranking was that only talking about the present is not enough to make a programme relevant. While some highlighted before that a relevant programme is one that is up-to-date, this ranking forced them to become more explicit in what it then is in content that leads to relevance. In the words of Tessa: 'In that one [referring to the statement ranked fifth] you only talk about the present, whereas in that one [referring to the statement ranked second] you learn about certain theories that you apply to current issues. That is why that one is better'. Or as Franz—who stated before that he considered it important for a programme to be up-to-date—put it, 'we can do a course on Brexit, but how relevant is that in 10 years?'. When asked whether content should be king, the group agreed that this should not be the case. The term 'applicable' in the first statement particularly resonated within the group. Or as Anna stated: 'You can reflect on current societal issues, but it should also prepare you to think in a certain way so you can apply it later on'.

In sum, both the survey and the focus group provide insights into how students perceive and discuss relevance of a study programme. Relevance is important for students, and they are well capable of explaining what they consider relevance to be. While the survey seemed to indicate that up-to-date content is the most important aspect of relevance, the focus group discussion made clear that it is not so much the discussion of current content that matters. Linking back students' perceptions to our previous conceptualisation of relevance, it is important for a programme to provide students with the tools to reflect upon current issues and to ensure that taught skills and knowledge are applicable in the real world. The subsequent question, therefore, is to what extent both the design—at curriculum, course and assessment level—and delivery of PBL effectively lay the foundation for a relevant programme.



How effective is PBL in ensuring relevance and the capacity to deal with societal change?

In both the survey and the focus group, we asked what elements of PBL work best in ensuring that a study programme is relevant and capable of capturing societal change. The answers to the open survey question again often contained more than one explanation, but it is particularly the room for discussion and debates that leads to a better understanding of current developments (mentioned 36 times). This is nicely captured by the following answer:

Regarding contemporary European developments, discussions are best conducted with everyone together and not just one person (the teacher) dictating the information. In the natural sciences there is not so much room for discussion on facts and figures, while the social sciences encourage such discussion. This is where PBL comes in and plays a vital role in understanding contemporary European developments.

What discussions and debates particularly lead to, is a better development of different perspectives on a particular issue (mentioned 33 times), which in turn enhances one's reflection capacity (mentioned 11 times). In addition, the students in the focus group—when asked to write down their observations about what tools work for a programme to be able to deal with societal change—mostly point to active exercises where students apply their knowledge to a specific topical issue, such as debates.

However, the survey results also illustrate that while PBL may be of key importance in terms of relevance and connection to contemporary issues, students are quite critical about the way it is implemented. This is despite the fact that students have a predominantly positive view of PBL's effectiveness in terms of helping them understand contemporary developments, as can be seen from Fig. 2.

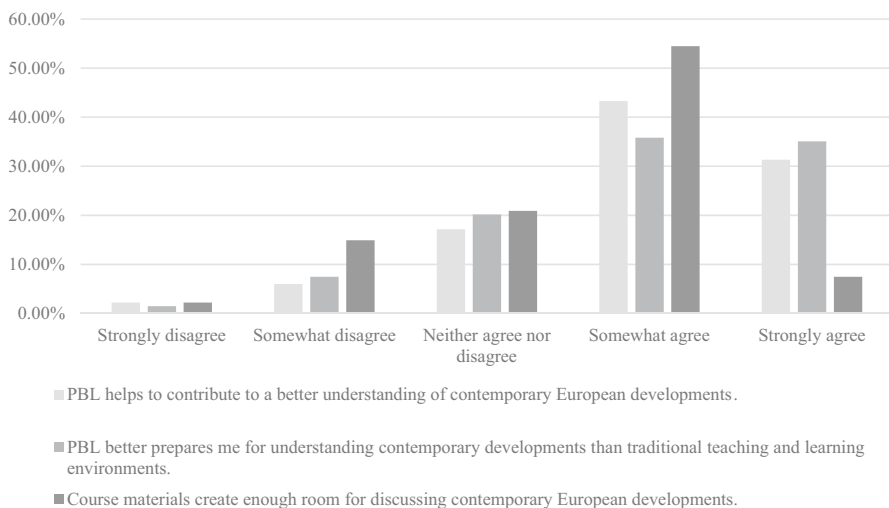


Fig. 2 Problem-based learning (PBL) and European Studies



However, when asked to reflect on how PBL can help to better understand contemporary issues, students' answers remain rather abstract and do not lead to a clearly shared perspective.

Students seem to like the responsibility they have within PBL, as illustrated by a student who states that PBL helps to 'take ownership of my learning'. They also believe that an active discussion can help to link course topics to contemporary issues. Yet, students also relate to challenges identified in the literature on PBL, namely the different quality of groups, in particular due to seemingly unprepared or non-participating students, and the varying application of PBL, often due to tutors who disregard PBL philosophy (Maudsley et al. 2008; Sproncken-Smith and Harland 2009). As one student put it:

PBL can work rather well if both the tutor and the group have a same understanding of what a PBL meeting means. If everybody knows what is expected of him/her and fulfills their tasks, than [*sic!*] PBL is a nice way of learning. Otherwise, it can feel as a complete waste of time.

Students also mention that PBL does not work in all courses, because it is seen as being applied too rigidly (PBL as 'seven steps') or when courses are simply too crowded with topics to be covered for the examination. In other words, students report mixed experiences and very few students wholeheartedly embrace the current PBL practice in the BA ES. This is phrased very clearly by one-third-year student:

In my first year of EUS I was very satisfied and enjoyed the tutorials a lot since PBL was applied in all tutorials. However, in the second year and the second half of the third year I sat in tutorials where no PBL was used which was a pity. When I did my minor in the Faculty of Law, I was positively surprised. There PBL was consistently applied, it worked out pretty well and it helped staying motivated during studying. When I came back to the faculty in February I was very disappointed since PBL was not applied.

The focus group helped us to further understand how PBL can help to deal with societal change. We asked the students why they thought that we put forward this expectation, to which Willem answered that PBL is about having an open discussion, using solid arguments. Or, as Franz stated, 'PBL is the best way to have an open discussion'. The debate soon shifted to what then is the best format to have an open debate, and here some of the students seemed to have preferences that do not directly match the original ideas behind PBL. While PBL philosophy concentrates on self-directed learning in which brainstorming by the group is crucial to unravel the direction of the self-study phase, some of the focus group participants would much rather see the tutor provide learning goals.

This observation was further strengthened during the exercise we asked students to do. We presented them with two versions of a PBL assignment. Designing PBL assignments (or problems) requires taking into account the aforementioned four principles of constructive, collaborative, contextualised and self-directed learning. Variation is also important, in design (text only, pictures, a combination of both),



but also to address different types of problems (for instance, aimed at explaining certain phenomena or aimed at learning how to act in a certain situation). Gradually, students should also encounter more complex assignments, hence mimicking the fact that in reality we are also often confronted with problems for which we have little or incomplete information (Dolmans et al. 1997; Schmidt and Moust 2010).

The first assignment that we presented students with was an existing one from the end of the first year (Fig. 3). It is aimed at learning more about theories that explain EU integration, but also its day-to-day functioning. This is a problematic assignment, in particular because it already sets questions and literature, which conflicts with PBL's self-directed nature, but also because it combines two topics (the different types of theories).

The second assignment aimed to support self-directed learning by means of a leaner text, the addition of three images, and the removal of the literature (Fig. 4). As such, it is a more complex assignment that students should gradually be introduced to at the end of their first year. We asked students what they thought the assignments were about. We also asked them which of the two they preferred.

Earlier some students expressed that they would much rather have more steering by the tutor, for instance by providing students with the learning goals. With regard to assignments, students also rather preferred the first, directive assignment; the second assignment was perceived to be 'scary'. Students wondered how they would determine what to study exactly; how much they would have to read and whether or not they would choose the 'right' literature.

When pushing the group to elaborate, it turned out that exam anxiety was particularly driving their reactions. Or, as Franz put it, 'what we are discussing now is the relevance of getting a good grade'. In other words, students feared not to be as prepared as in a situation where there is more steering. Particularly courses that end with an in-class knowledge exam, were considered unsuitable for a more self-directed version of PBL. This illustrates that another relevant aspect of understanding when and how a study programme is relevant is its assessment approach and related feelings of uncertainty. This is a topic that we did not explicitly cover in our research, but that does surface in other studies. For instance, the mismatch between the way in which learning in PBL is structured and the way in which it is assessed can lead to anxiety (Canavan 2008; Erdem 2012).

To conclude, generally students feel that PBL is a good educational approach to ensure programme relevance and its capability of capturing societal change. However, PBL needs to be applied consistently and correctly by both students and tutor; something that is not always achieved. In addition, it seems that students do not entirely adhere to all principles behind PBL. Yes, they value discussions and debates, and they want the programme to allow reflection on current topical issues; however, this needs to be done in a rather structured context. Some students in the focus group hinted that they would much rather have the tutor provide the learning goals, and all students indicated that an assignment text without much steering and prescribed literature would perhaps be too much. Students want to be empowered, but only to a certain degree.



Assignment (old)

The enormous expansions of tasks of the EU have been among the most remarkable features of the EU's development. As early as 1988, Jacques Delors predicted that 80 percent of all legislation affecting European countries would be made in Brussels within 10 years. How can we explain what we see happening in Europe? What theoretical assumptions and concepts allow us to identify patterns and predict a certain development? The European Union created an interesting puzzle for theorising, being "more than an International Organisation but less than a state".

Traditional integration theories might be able to explain why this shift took place (although they do not agree on the quality of this shift, if we remember: integration vs cooperation). Yet, they are not suitable to explain how the EU works as a political system. Defining the EU as a 'multi-level governance' system, for example, assumes that "while national governments are formidable participants in EU policy-making, control has slipped away from them" (Marks, Hooghe & Blank 1996:342).

Additionally, other alternative approaches emerged to question how the EU as political system works: new institutionalism and social constructivism were adapted from the International Relations literature to the European Union setting and challenge the domination of rational choice explanations. Globalisation and increased interdependencies filled the governance approach, while the fiscal debt crisis in Europe brings back and challenges traditional questions of integration and the meaning of "intergovernmentalism".

Required readings

- Nugent, N. (2017). Conceptualizing the European Union. In *The Government and Politics of the European Union* (pp. 435-446). 8th edition, Hampshire: Palgrave (library)
- Nugent, N. (2017). Theorizing European Integration and EU Politics. In *The Government and Politics of the European Union* (pp. 447-460). 8th edition, Hampshire: Palgrave (library)
- Marks, G., Hooghe, L. and Blank, K. (1996). European Integration from the 1980s: State Centric vs. Multi-level Governance. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34(3), 341-378.

- Bickerton, C. J., Hodson, D., & Puetter, U. (2015). The New Intergovernmentalism: European Integration in the Post-Maastricht Era. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53(4), 703-722.

Want to know more? Optional literature

- Amy Verdun, (2015). A historical institutionalist explanation of the EU's responses to the euro area financial crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2): 219-237.
- Rosamond, B. (2010). New Theories of European Integration. In M. Cini (Ed.), *European Union Politics* (pp. 104-122). 3rd edition, Oxford: OUP. (library)
- Pollack, M. (2005). Theorizing EU Policy-Making. In H. Wallace & W. Wallace & M. Pollack (Eds.), *Policy-Making in the European Union* (pp. 13-48). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (library)
- Want to read more about how current developments in the EU can be explained from a theoretical perspective?*
- Anne Niemann, Anne and Ioannou, Demosthenes (2015). European economic integration in times of crisis: a case of neofunctionalism? *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2): 196-218.
- Frank Schimmelfennig, Frank (2015). Liberal intergovernmentalism and the euro area crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2): 177-195.
- Puetter, Uwe (2012). Europe's deliberative intergovernmentalism: the role of the Council and the European Council in EU economic governance. *Journal of European Public Policy* 19 (2): 161-178.



Fig. 3 Existing problem-based learning (PBL) assignment

Discussion and conclusions

In times of crises, HE programmes in fields such as European Studies, International Relations and Politics might run into challenges regarding their relevance and their capability to capture this ever-changing society. We aimed to provide a better understanding as to how study programmes dealing with contemporary societal issues can adequately do so. We focused on the perceptions of students of Maastricht University's BA ES and asked them when they consider a study programme to be relevant and what programme characteristics are necessary to deal with societal change.

Based on a survey and a focus group, we revealed student perceptions of programme relevance and their views on the usefulness of PBL as an educational approach. The literature suggests that there are three key elements that may help to ensure a programme's relevance and capacity to deal with societal change. First, programmes need to ensure a critical and diverse approach to multifaceted, contemporary developments (Manners and Rosamond 2018; Rittberger and Blauburger 2018). Second, it is important to ensure the application of theory to realistic cases (Kember et al. 2008) and to link content to students' personal and career goals (Bainbridge Frymier and Shulman 1995). Third, the aforementioned points are more likely to be achieved in an educational environment that engages and empowers students (Bovill et al. 2011).

Our analysis illustrates that students largely agree to these elements. Interdisciplinarity is a key reason for students to opt for European Studies. The observation that 'content can't be king' (Gijsselaers et al. 2014: 21) and that critical reflection and application of theory to realistic cases is crucial, was shared by the students in the focus group, although the answers to the survey at first suggested a more diffuse picture. While students agree that PBL is a good approach towards reaching this goal, they are also critical about the extent to which the current application of PBL really reaches this goal. It is crucial to ensure consistent application of PBL across the board, including active participation by all students. In this application of PBL, however, students seem to favour a more 'guided' version of PBL where assignment texts are clearly stating the questions to be raised and provide the literature to be discussed.

We interpret the latter observation in light of our previous remark that anxiety and stress among students seem to be on the increase. In addition, the focus on exams and tests is also highlighted as a challenge in Moust et al.'s (2005) critical evaluation of the application of PBL. Increased specialisation of academic staff may also be problematic in this respect, as PBL in its ideal guise requires generalist facilitators instead of content-focussed lecturers (David et al. 2017; Manners and Rosamond 2018). Yet, we did not specifically look into these matters. Another element that was not explicitly covered in our research, but which is relevant to students, is how assessment formats come into play. A final limitation concerns the fact that we have conducted this research in a population of students used to a PBL approach; results might be different when analysing a student population that is used to a more teacher-led environment.



In conclusion, what seems to be key in ensuring relevance of study programmes dealing with societal change? Our findings appear to link back to the different experiences of relevance, as mentioned above, in particular intrinsic and vicarious experience (Kember et al. 2008). The former is reflected in the emphasis on contemporary issues and job perspectives; the latter in the role of teachers, and we may add, the role of the learning environment. This leaves us with two challenges. First, to ensure that students experience learning in PBL to be relevant, it needs to be designed and delivered in a consistent way. At programme level, professional development of teaching staff and introduction of students to PBL are important. At course level, this concerns the design of assignments, but certainly also the importance of ensuring that the type of assessment fits with learning in PBL.

Second, we believe that society needs graduates who have the skills to deal with complexity, not necessarily knowledge of the details of recent European crises. But then we need to better explain to our students how the 'here and now' is less important than background knowledge and skills required to analyse the 'here and now'. The focus group discussion showed that students are able to reflect on this.

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